

The Park Goddess and the Rose

BY V. A. HUNGERFORD.

HE STOOD hesitating a moment, then with an odd shuffling gait made for the nearest bench. It was isolated from the rest of the park by a bit of hedge. Directly behind the bench was a rose bush in full, heavy bloom. From the other side of the hedge came childish voices and laughter, and the chatter of nurse maids. From farther away came the steady drone of a lawn mower.

The youth—he was but 22—slouched down upon the bench and pulled his cap over his eyes. His cheap suit was badly wrinkled as though he had slept in it. His face was unshaven and of a peculiar pallor. His expression was bitter. He was tired and hungry and heart-sick. He had been unable to get a single day's work since he had started life all over again two weeks before—and his \$5 was gone.

The merriment about him, the warm sun flooding him, he sat wrapt in brooding meditation. What had happened to him in that one long year? Poignantly sorry for what he had done, anxious to redeem himself, he had looked forward to the day when his punishment should be over, and he could start again—with a clean slate. He had faced the world again with squared shoulders, clear-eyed, a cheap suit, \$5—and the stigma! He hadn't figured on the stigma. Full of good resolves, he had started out, first in the business section of the city, then in the lower districts, and now in final desperation he had tried the fashionable avenues, begging for odd jobs in payment of a meal. And it had always been the same. An appraising glance, narrowed to a stare of comprehension, refusal and the closing of the door.

He had had nothing to eat since the day before yesterday, and all day thoughts kept cropping up in his mind, thoughts that preyed through his weakened body upon the good resolves he had made only two weeks before. A row of pies cooling on a convenient window ledge, easily within reach, had caused him agony that brought the cold perspiration out all over him. Nothing but the sudden vision of gray stone walls and a tall, iron gate saved him. He turned and fled from temptation. But now his eyes were furtive, his shoulders drooped, and his step was dead and hopeless.

A short distance away he glimpsed a blue uniform, and drew farther back into seclusion on his bench. The park policeman passed by on the other side of the hedge. The convict relaxed, and resumed his brooding again.

He told himself there was none to care whether he made good or not. And there always must be somebody to care—if it's nothing but a starved cur from the gutters to lick your hand apologetically and wag a friendly tail and look at you with sympathetic eyes. He suddenly bowed his face in his hands.

After a while he became conscious that someone was watching him. He raised his eyes slowly and then stared. She stood on the grass before him, a dazzle of blue silk and brown curls and deep, gray eyes. She was a well-trained child, but with fine carelessness tossed aside conventionality to be human. She recognized misery when she saw it.

"Are you sick?" She looked straight at him and there was no fear nor shrinking in her eyes.

"No," he said slowly, "I'm not—that is—no—I'm not!" That sickening hunger was gnawing at his stomach again, and it was impossible to keep his gaze off the apple she held. He was unconscious of the sudden greed that lit his eyes.

She was only 9, but she had heard of such things. Her eyes widened in incredulous amazement.

"You're hungry!" The youth flushed, dropped his eyes ashamed, and fingered his cap nervously.

She thrust the apple into his hand. "Eat it," she commanded. "And wait here. Nurse brought lunch with us—I'll get you some."

She flashed away and he had barely devoured the apple before she returned, her hands full of dainty sandwiches.

"Here—quick—nurse saw me, old cat! She'll be after me!" She crowded the food into his hands. "Good-by!"

The nurse's shocked face appeared around the end of the hedge. The little girl's expression changed from sympathy for the youth to impudence for the nurse. In sheer impishness she pulled the rose from her hair and

tossed it toward him. It fell at his feet.

"E-liz-a-beth!" The nurse's shocked voice followed the child, as with a peal of merry laughter, a flash of blue silk and flying curls, she disappeared around the other end of the hedge.

The youth ate the food greedily, then picked up the rose. The brooding bitterness was gone from his face; gradually hope began to dawn in his eyes. He had had sympathy without revulsion, charity without condescension. The food did him much good. The kindness did him infinitely more—it gave him confidence in himself. He felt suddenly that things were going to turn for the better. There was good stuff in him and he would bring it out. They couldn't keep him down. His faith in himself restored, and the pangs of hunger quieted, the memory of his temptation earlier in the day struck him as gross weakness. He trembled at the thought of it and firmly decided to stay straight, no matter what happened. He never wanted to see the inside of a jail again.

The sun warmed him pleasantly. He told himself he would rest a little before again trying to get work. He felt sure that this time he would succeed. He settled himself comfortably and dozed off.

He awoke with a shiver. The sun was setting. The park was deserted. Not a sound broke the stillness, except the bedtime fuss of birds. He started to leave the bench when he caught the measured crunch of gravel beneath the tread of the park policeman. He sat very still, hoping the minion of the law would pass by on the other side. He was happy and confident, and felt he couldn't bear the gimlet stare just then. He glanced down at the rose he still held, and a half smile curved his boyish lips. He would keep that rose always, as a sort of mascot. It might bring him luck.

But the policeman didn't pass by on the other side. He came and stood looking down upon the youth. He recognized the "stigma" and scowled.

"Better move on!" And then he saw the rose.

"Been picking flowers, eh? Don't you know it's \$10 fine to pick flowers in the park?"

The youth went white and began to tremble. His eyes followed the policeman's glance from the rose he held to the laden bush behind him. The blooms were identical.

"I—I didn't pick it!" he stammered; but the knowledge of the stigma caused him to drop his eyes guiltily.

"Don't lie!" threatened the policeman. "It's 10 bucks or 10 days—you can have your choice!"

Real terror looked out of the youth's eyes now.

"But—but—a little girl gave it to me—I didn't pick it! A little girl in blue silk—with brown curls—she gave it to me!"

"A likely story!" The officer's eyes swept the youth meaningly; then he added: "The less trouble you make, the better for you!"

The boy's eyes grew tragic with bitterness. His pale face set in stern, hard lines. With sneering lips he looked down upon the flower he held, emblem of love and friendship, turned to a weapon against him. His impulse was to crush it in his hand and throw it far from him. Then between it and him there visualized a dainty child's face, framed in brown curls—a face innocent and full of sympathy and confidence. A moment he tottered on the brink of reckless despair. Then the black look left his face.

"It's just luck," he said to himself reassuringly. "When I get out I'll show them! They can't keep a good man down! There's good stuff—and plenty of it—in Billy McMahon! I'll prove—"

"Are you coming?" The harsh voice cut his thought in twain.

"Yes—I'm coming."

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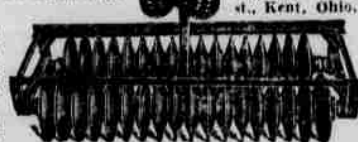
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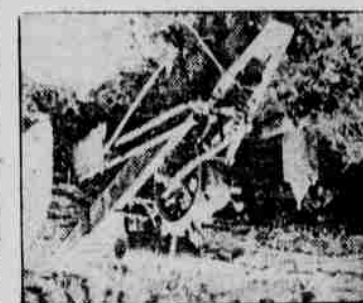
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